

## “Daniel’s Dream”

Sermon on Sunday, November 6, 2022

Dear church,

I never dreamed of interpreting Daniel’s bizarre night vision that we heard in the first reading for this Sunday. Dream interpretations are outside of my wheelhouse, the apocalyptic parts of the Bible are not my cup of tea, and the four beasts are not animals I want to pet in real life, do you? A lion, a bear, a leopard, and a horned monster... I know, it’s the season of horror movies, but thank you very much Daniel! I imagine these four beasts circling me, looking at me, staring me in the eye. Not my idea of comfort! At least, I didn’t feel this very comforting until yesterday morning, when Bill and Linda O’ Brien introduced us to the concept of power animals. Maybe in the spiritual world they can be our friends and guides.

Daniel was a Jewish leader who lived among his people in exile in the Babylonian kingdom, roughly centered in modern-day Iraq, several hundred years before Jesus was born. He was known for his superb education and distinguished himself in the service of the King, becoming one of his valued advisers. Daniel is also described as a devout person, someone who was in touch with God, whose dreams often had something important to say about the state of the world. In this chapter he writes: *“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea. The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. I watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a human being, and the mind of a human was given to it.”*

Can you picture this? A lion, with wings of an eagle. The wings are torn off and the lion-like figure stands on two feet like a human being and has the mind of a human. These beasts are coming out of the sea, the place of chaos at the beginning of creation, and they are endowed with special powers. A lion is a powerful and fearful animal, the king of animals. Now imagine a lion with wings of an eagle and the mind of a human being. Can anyone stop that creature? That’s exactly what Daniel was insinuating. The first animal

represented his own adopted kingdom, Babylon, and that's how Babylonians felt at the time. Can anyone stop us? Come and try... We are powerful!!! We are invincible!!! Sometimes, powerful empires are naïve enough to believe that they will last forever. But at some point, even the most powerful empires disintegrate, drunk from their own power, exhausted from their great run of making history. And another power enters the scene.

There is wide agreement among biblical scholars that the four beasts in this dream represent the four empires that shaped the life of the Jewish people during and after Exile. The people of God lived under the thumb of Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans, in that historic order. Later, they would also live under the thumb of Christian Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and other powers. I have two thoughts about this far-fetched dream for us. One is related to the feeling that many of us have at this time. In 2022, in the days of perma-crisis, we feel that our world has become scarier, less stable, less predictable, and we are worried about the future. It seems that rogue leaders are on the rise everywhere like beasts coming out of chaos, threatening our existence. This dream points at the limitations of worldly powers. They may have their time on the main stage of this world, but it won't last forever says this dream. The Babylonians are gone, the Persians are gone, so are the old Greeks and Romans. The Jewish people are still with us. The people of God are still here. And that is as comforting to me today as it was to the people in the Babylonian Exile thousands of years ago.

The other thought is... how important it is to pay attention to our dreams! They can open doors we didn't even know existed. Some may call it non-ordinary reality. Sometimes people are given amazing insight from the world of the unconscious. German writer Hermann Hesse had a powerful dream in the years leading up to WW I in which he saw rivers turning into blood in Europe. He woke up shaken without initially knowing what it was about. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung famously recorded and interpreted his dreams; often the material went far beyond anything he had ever seen or experienced in his waking hours. Frequently, symbols from foreign cultures appeared in Jung's dreams, so exotic that he could only make sense of it via research. Which tells us that there are connections in our world that escape the normal routes of learning and memorizing.

In our “enlightened” times we have devalued dreams. We have even devalued sleep itself. In our business and work culture, people who sleep little and work much are adored for their stamina and work ethic. They are the heroes. But there must be a reason why God ordained a full one-third of our lifetime (on average) to be spent sleeping. Sleep is not only an important time of rest for our bodies; it is also a time when our minds get reset, when God works creatively through a vast web of neuro connections to speak to us, to whisper in our ears of things to come, things to let go, things to ponder, things we tried to forget but must face...

And so, I am almost disappointed that nobody fell asleep during my sermon. But seriously: God speaks to us in our dreams sometimes; the more we pay attention to them, the more we will likely discover. May God bless your day and night, your conscious thoughts and the wilderness of your dreams. And may God bring us together with the saints of all time. They are here with us as we worship this morning, praying with us, praying for us, and asking us to take heart. Picture them, your ancestors, your favorite saints, what Hebrews calls the “cloud of witnesses” praying for us at this very moment... Amen.